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AUTHOR Lee, Courtland C.
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ABSTRACT

As helping professions enter the 21st century and nascent network technologies realize their full potential as therapeutic and educational modalities, it is an ethical and moral imperative that the digital divide be bridged. It is important that those in counseling and related fields take active steps to ensure that cybercounseling is available to all clients regardless of their social or economic status. The following four guidelines focus on this goal. First, counselors should conduct an audit of their community, assess where the digital divide exists, and investigate who has limited or no computer access. Then, counselors should form consultative relationships with key players in their community who could partner with each other to make technology hardware and software available to those with limited access. When necessary and appropriate, counselors should help clients develop competencies necessary to take advantage of cybercounseling. Finally, counselors should advocate at all levels of government to raise awareness and increase legislative involvement to ensure that crucial network technology is available to all. The issues of access and privilege that have traditionally divided the client populations into the "haves" and the "have nots" must not be allowed to stifle the vast clinical and educational potential of network technology. All people who seek help, regardless of their demographic realities, should be able to find the on-ramp to the information superhighway. (Contains 10 references.) (MKA)

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Cybercounseling and Empowerment: Bridging the Digital Divide

COURTLAND C. LEE

In the United States, the country with the greatest gap in wealth between rich and poor of any industrialized nation, basing the opportunity for quality mental health and educational services on access to the new network technologies is potentially to consign many to marginalization and disenfranchisement. This chapter addresses a major issue that must be considered with respect to cybercounseling: ensuring equal access to counseling and related services via network technologies. A troubling scenario as we enter the 21st century is that those with access to computers and other means of technology are positioned to take advantage of cybercounseling and thereby benefit from quality mental health and related services on-line, while those without such access are at risk for receiving lesser services. This is underscored by recent data from the U.S. Department of Commerce (1999) that revealed that households with incomes of $75,000 and higher are 20 times more likely to have access to the Internet than those at the lowest income levels, and more than 9 times as likely to have a computer at home. Additionally, Whites are more likely to have access to the Internet from home than Blacks or Hispanics have from any location. Significantly, regardless of income level, Americans living in rural areas are lagging behind in Internet access. Indeed, at the lowest income levels, those in urban areas are more than twice as likely to have Internet access than those earning the same income in rural areas.

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Given these data, it is imperative that, as cybercounseling continues to evolve as a viable service delivery mode, those professionals who have access to and make extensive clinical and educational use of computers act so that network technology becomes a tool of empowerment, not disenfranchisement. It is also imperative that equal access becomes an integral part of this mode of service delivery.

Guidelines are provided in this chapter for ensuring equal access to the technology for cybercounseling. It starts with some reflections on the traditions of mental health and related professions with respect to power and access. Next, the promise of cybercounseling with respect to human empowerment is considered. The chapter concludes with guidelines to ensure equal access to cybercounseling.

THE TRADITION OF MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONS: ISSUES OF POWER AND ACCESS

There is little doubt that mental health and related professions have a distinguished history and tradition of helping individuals solve problems and make decisions related to academic, career, and personal-social issues. The services represented by counseling and related disciplines have proven to be helpful to scores of people. However, it has been passionately argued over the past two decades that the nature of these same professions has been an oppressive and sociopolitical process with respect to large and diverse segments of the population. This argument has been voiced through a number of perspectives including the multicultural (Lee, 1997; Sue & Sue, 1990), the feminist (Cook, 1993; Smith & Siegal, 1985), and the social justice (Katz, 1985; Lewis & Arnold, 1998). The basic argument from these perspectives is that many groups of people are inappropriately served or are underserved in mental health and related systems.

It has been asserted that the scope and practice of mental health and educational professions tend to be gender-, race-, and class-biased. Within the traditions of these professions, the ideal consumer of mental health services tends to belong to the groups in society with the privileges of gender, race, and class. This consumer has often been referred to as the YAVIS (young-attractive-verbal-intelligent-successful) client. This is an individual who, more often

than not, has voluntarily sought the services of a mental health professional for help with problem resolution or decision making. Implicit in the profile of such a client is the fact that he (or possibly she) generally has the financial and related resources to access the best possible counseling or other psychoeducational services available.

Large segments of the population have traditionally not fit the so-called YAVIS profile, however. For these people, access to and provision of quality mental health or educational services has been problematic. When these services are considered in culturally, socially, or economically diverse contexts, it has often been the case that service provision is a forced rather than a voluntary experience. This experience is often with an insensitive or unresponsive representative of the vast social welfare system. Unfortunately, the odds are often extremely high that many individuals without a degree of cultural, economic, or social privilege will not have access to quality clinical services. Therefore, rather than being an empowering factor in many people's lives, counseling and related services become disenfranchising. Counseling contributes to further cultural, economic, or social marginalization for scores of client groups.

Given this tradition, as cybercounseling continues to evolve, several intriguing and important questions need to be considered. Will cybercounseling as a therapeutic or educational resource be empowering or disenfranchising? Will cybercounseling be available only to those individuals whose social and economic status and privilege afford them access to the technology for quality cybercounseling? The answers to such questions lie at the very heart of the issue of equal access.

CYBERCOUNSELING AND THE PROMISE OF HUMAN EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment has become an increasingly popular construct in counseling and education. In counseling it has been defined in the following manner:

> Empowerment is the process by which people, organizations, or groups who are powerless or marginalized (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their

> lives, (c) which they exercise, (d) without infringing on the rights of others, and (e) which coincides with actively supporting the empowerment of others in their community. (McWhirter, 1994, p. 12)

As a tool in this important process, cybercounseling offers the potential for providing new ways to promote intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. The computer and its inherent technological capacity presents an opportunity to provide services to people who have traditionally been ill-served in counseling in a number of innovative ways. Cybercounseling holds the promise of new ways of helping people become aware of power dynamics in their lives and develop new life skills. It also is a potentially potent force in helping groups of people maximize their collective potential.

For example, with computer technology counselors now have the ability to offer services to areas chronically underserved by mental health professionals. Sitting at a computer terminal, a counselor in a large urban area can now offer his or her services to clients in remote rural areas where social services have historically been inadequate.

Additionally, cybercounseling holds the potential of affording clients greater control over choice of the therapeutic setting. An economically disadvantaged inner-city client, for example, may be able to sit at a computer terminal in his or her own home, a public library, a school, or a place of worship and interact with a counselor in an office miles away. Rather than having to meet with a counselor in the often alienating and intimidating confines of the professional office, the client could engage in the therapeutic process in the comfort and perceived safety of familiar and validating surroundings.

Such potential for new types of distance relationships via computer technology opens up new vistas for promoting human empowerment at both the intra- and interpersonal level. This is particularly true for those who have been marginalized due to social and/or economic circumstances.

Computer technology holds great promise for increasing self-esteem among those whose life circumstances have impacted negatively on how they have come feel about their self-worth. Likewise, cybercounseling can be a major vehicle by which clients may be in-

troduced to new academic, career, or personal-social decision-making models. Exposing a client to the World Wide Web, for example, could possibly provide him or her with crucial information vital to an important life decision.

Significantly, the very process of using and potentially mastering computer technology may increase a client's self-efficacy. Developing the competencies to engage as a client in cybercounseling may go a long way to help shape an individual's sense of environmental mastery. This, in and of itself, is potentially empowering for people whose life circumstances have socialized them to be intrapersonally reactive as opposed to proactive.

Similarly, cybercounseling can play a crucial empowering role at the interpersonal level. Computer technology may promote skills in setting boundaries, becoming more assertive, and communicating more effectively.

In addition to empowerment at the individual level, emerging computer technology has great potential at the group level. Cybercounseling may prove to be a potent tool in the process of organizing and educating groups of traditionally disenfranchised clients for social action and systemic change. It has been asserted that problematic client behavior can often be traced to the negative effects of environment on cognitive and affective functioning. Client issues, therefore, are often merely reactions or symptoms to deep-seated problems in the social environments in which people must interact. A counselor, therefore, may need to become an agent of social change and intervene not only at an individual level but at a system-wide level as well. Either in partnership with and/or for clients, a counselor in such a role challenges cultural, social, historical, or economic barriers that stifle optimal mental health and human development. Such a professional should have two important goals in the counseling process: to help clients understand problem causation by recognizing the influence of the social context on human development, and to help empower clients by assisting them in developing and implementing strategies to eliminate or reduce systemic discrimination or oppression in all of its forms (Lee, 1998).

A counselor networked electronically with a group of educated and organized, hence empowered, clients represents a potent force

to combat marginalizing and oppressive forces. Imagine helping to educate economically disadvantaged women and men about changes in welfare laws and then organizing them to make their voices heard in state legislatures about how those changes could negatively effect their ability to care for their children via a listserv and by collecting background information from the World Wide Web!

The potential of technological networking for human empowerment is predicated on the assumption that computer hardware and software are universally accessible. However, this is currently not the case. Social and economic disparities exclude many individuals from access to the important technology that makes cybercounseling a reality. Counselors and related professionals, therefore, face a challenge: ensuring that cybercounseling does not become a part of the tradition of socioeconomic bias and cultural privilege that has often unequally stratified the scope and quality of mental health and educational services.

Ethical practice dictates that counselors provide for equal access to computer applications in counseling services. To do less will be condoning or engaging in discrimination against those whose social or economic status preclude ready access to computer technology (see the *ACA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, 1997). The next section provides guidelines for ensuring equal access to the network technologies for cybercounseling.

GUIDELINES FOR CYBERCOUNSELING: ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS

In discussing guidelines for equal access to cybercounseling, this mode of psychoeducational intervention must be viewed from a broader perspective. Efforts to ensure such access should be guided by some basic interconnected principles. First, cybercounseling should be considered merely one of a variety of service delivery modes. Second, used ethically, and possibly in conjunction with more traditional forms of intervention, this methodology can potentially enhance a professional's ability to meet the needs of clients. Third, regardless of cultural, economic, or social background, it is important to remember that cybercounseling is not for every client.

Guided by these principles, counselors and their colleagues in related professions will have to step out of their traditional roles and become advocates for social action to ensure equal access to cybercounseling (Casey, 1998). The following guidelines are closely linked and focus on the goal of providing equal access to computer applications in counseling and related services.

- **Community audit:** Counselors should conduct an audit of their community, assess where the digital divide exists, and investigate which individuals or potential client groups have limited or no access to computer technology.
- **Partnerships:** Following an audit, counselors should form consultative relationships with key players in their community that could partner with each other to make technology hardware and software available to those with limited access. These players might include schools, community organizations, and selected businesses. For example, a counselor might consult with a computer firm and work with them on initiatives to make hardware, software, and educational/technical assistance available pro bono to schools, religious institutions, or other centers of community activity in economically disadvantaged areas.
- **Education:** When necessary, and as appropriate, counselors should help clients and/or potential clients develop the competencies necessary to take advantage of cybercounseling. The acquisition of the awareness, knowledge, and skills for computer literacy should be incorporated into educational or career exploration and planning.
- **Governmental advocacy:** In order to ensure equal access to computer technology, a supportive policy framework is needed at all levels of government. Legislation and government policies must be sensitive to social and economic inequities with respect to network technologies. Counselors should advocate at all levels of government, therefore, to raise awareness and increase legislative involvement to ensure that crucial network technology is available to all. Socioeconomic status should not automatically exclude people from access to technology that, in large measure, has become basic to a decent quality of life. For example, counselors may need to work to ensure that laws and policies regard-

ing Internet access do not become exclusive to those individuals with the financial resources to take advantage of such services.

CONCLUSION

As helping professions enter the 21st century and nascent network technologies realize their full potential as therapeutic and educational modalities, it is an ethical and moral imperative that the digital divide be bridged. It is important that those in counseling and related fields take active steps to ensure that cybercounseling is available to all clients regardless of their social or economic status. The issues of access and privilege that have traditionally divided client populations into the "haves" and the "have nots" must not be allowed to stifle the vast clinical and educational potential of network technology. All people who seek help, regardless of their demographic realities, should be able to find the on ramp to the information superhighway.

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